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My myiasis or a brief account of the wondrous interconnectedness of life

I was surprised yet fascinated – but honestly not alarmed – when I pulled a 16 mm (5/8”) maggot from my flesh, an uninvited “guest” that returned with me from two weeks of butterfly fieldwork in the Central American country of Belize. It was the Neotropical or human bot, the parasitic larva of the botfly *Dermatobia hominis* Linnaeus, family Oestridae, known in Latin America by such names as berne, nuche, and tórsalo. This widespread dipteran, which infests a large number of different mammals and even birds, has a remarkable, if not unique, life history. (Other less specialized myiatic flies reported to parasitize people occur in most of the world’s warmer regions.) The female botfly does not lay eggs directly on human skin, but rather captures an active mosquito, other species of fly, or tick and carefully deposits 15 to 30 ova on the underside of the body. When, for example, the carrier mosquito sucks blood, contact with or warmth from the host (in this case, me!) stimulates rapid hatching, and the tiny grub quickly penetrates the skin through the bite or along a hair follicle. There it remains inside a subcutaneous cavity near the entrance hole that it needs for breathing, feeding raspily on tissue and molting twice. The larval period lasts approximately eight weeks in the body (mine was there about five), after which the spiny maggot leaves the tumorous swelling it produced, dropping to the ground and pupating in the soil. After a month or so, the rather large, metallic blue adult fly, which has atrophied mouthparts and does not eat, emerges to mate and begin the life cycle again.

Besides occasional discomfort, itching, and fluid discharge, I was not terribly bothered by the bot. The lesion, which my doctor originally diagnosed as a boil, quickly healed, and I was assured my health was never at serious risk. Furthermore, these botfly grubs are said to secrete an antibiotic that prevents the growth of competing bacteria and other infective agents. The live maggot was donated to the entomology department at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, where there was talk of using chicken meat to try to continue its development to adulthood.

I am almost embarrassed to add that, yes, I gave my “companion” the somewhat endearing name of Petey (the parasite).— KEITH WOLFE, 616 Alumrock Drive, Antioch, California 94509-6944, USA.